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Essay submission for Marks & Harrison 2026 Driver Safety Scholarship Contest

Throughout high school, I was focused on one thing: driving. My parents were always willing to take me wherever I needed to go whether it was practice, school events, or spending time with friends. They never complained and always supported me. Still, it was different. I wanted that independence. I wanted to be able to leave whenever I wanted to, blast whatever music in my car as loud as I wanted, make late night food runs, and experience that freedom. However, as soon as my peers and I started getting our permits and eventually license, the roads were not safer for it. At first, everyone was cautious. We drove slowly, gripped the steering wheel tightly, and double checked every mirror. We were nervous because we understood the responsibility of driving. But over time, that fear faded. Like most teenagers, we became comfortable too quickly. We became fearless in the worst way possible. Speeding became exciting instead of dangerous. Phones became impossible to ignore. Everyone thought accidents happened to other people, but not us.

Almost all of my friends have been involved in some kind of accident. Some hit parked cars while learning how to drive. Others rear-ended someone because they looked down for a second. At the time, those accidents felt small and almost funny, stories we would joke about later. A few months ago, we got the reality check we all needed. One of my friends was involved in a life threatening car accident. He was driving too fast while looking at his phone when another car hit him. His car rolled three times. Three times. He almost died. For months, he was in and out of the hospital recovering from his injuries. Even now, he still faces surgeries and long term recovery, including spinal surgery. His entire life changed because of a few seconds of distraction.

Seeing someone my age also lose their life completely changed the way I think about distracting driving. They say, something doesn't really affect you until it happens to you or someone you hold dear. Before that accident, texting while driving felt normalized, it would only take a second. Everyone does it. People answer quick texts at red lights, skip songs, check Snapchat notifications, or glance at TikTok "for

one second.” Social media has created a culture where people feel like they constantly need to be available. We are terrified of missing something. As a society, we have a serious case of FOMO. However, the reality is that the world will not end if you answer a text when you exit your vehicle.

What is even more disturbing is how common it has become for people to scroll on TikTok or Instagram while driving. It sounds dumb, yet it happens every single day. People have become so attached to their phones that they are willing to risk not only their own life but those around them. When driving 55 miles per hour, in just a few seconds you can travel the length of multiple football fields without looking at the road. Most people would never willingly close their eyes when driving across a football field but that is essentially what distracted driving does. People often don't realize how quickly a normal moment can turn tragic. Most crashes do not begin with someone thinking they are making a life altering decision. It starts with something ordinary: replying to a text, changing a song, checking directions, or opening a notification. That is why awareness campaigns about distracted driving need to feel personal and emotional rather than just informational. Unique campaign ideas are the only way to get people's attention.

One idea I have to raise awareness comes from a book called 'The Last Messages Received' by Emily Trunko. What began as a simple Tumblr project where people anonymously shared the final texts and messages from relationships that ended quickly became something much bigger occurred. The messages are raw, relatable, and deeply human. Some were heartbreaking, some confusing, and others were painfully ordinary. Every message captured a moment where everything changed forever. That same concept could be transformed into a powerful distracted driving awareness campaign. A social media movement such as #LastMessagesReceived or #ArriveAlive could encourage people to anonymously share the last message sent or received before a distracted driving crash. Survivors, as well as the families and friends of victims, could post screenshots or rewritten messages connected to real accidents. The power of this campaign is that it would not lecture or shame people. Instead, it would show reality. Imagine reading a message as simple as "One my way home," or "I'll answer in a second," only to learn it was the last text someone ever sent. Those ordinary messages would become devastating because they

reveal how quickly life can change. I think young people respond more to emotional connection than statistics. Numbers can feel distant, the odds of that happening are so small, but stories feel real. What made Emily Trunko's project so impactful was relatability. People saw themselves in the messages. This distracted driving campaign would work the same way. Instead of hearing another rule adults tell teenagers to follow, people would understand why it matters. They would recognize themselves in those small moments of distraction and realize how dangerous they truly are.

Social media is often part of the problem, but it can also become part of the solution. Teenagers spend hours online every day. Awareness campaigns should meet young people where they already are instead of relying on posters or lectures at school. If distracted driving became socially embarrassing rather than socially accepted, behavior would start to change. Just as movements online have changed attitudes around vaping, bullying, or drunk driving, social media could also reshape how people view texting and driving.

Distracting driving has changed the way I see responsibility, independence, and consequences when behind the wheel. Driving once represented freedom to me, but it also represents accountability. A car is not just transportation; it is something powerful enough to save or destroy lives. Watching someone close to me almost die because of distracted driving puts things into perspective, life is very fragile. At the end of the day, no text, notification, or video is worth risking life. The message can wait. Social media can wait. What matters the most is arriving safely to those I love.